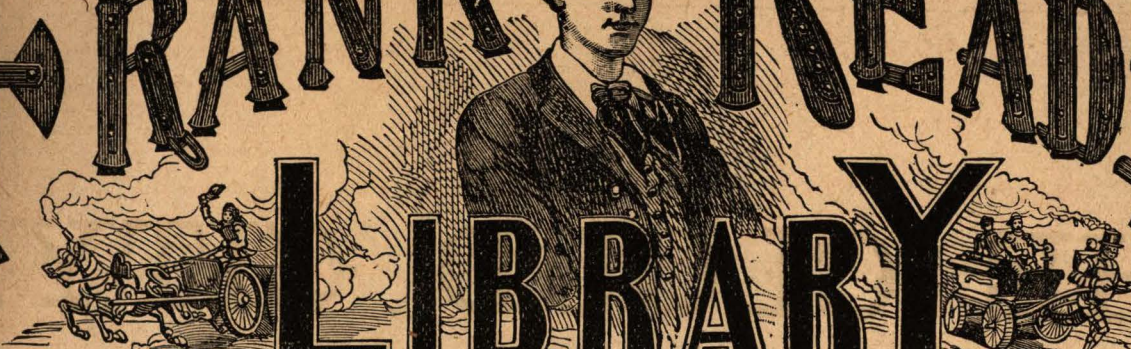


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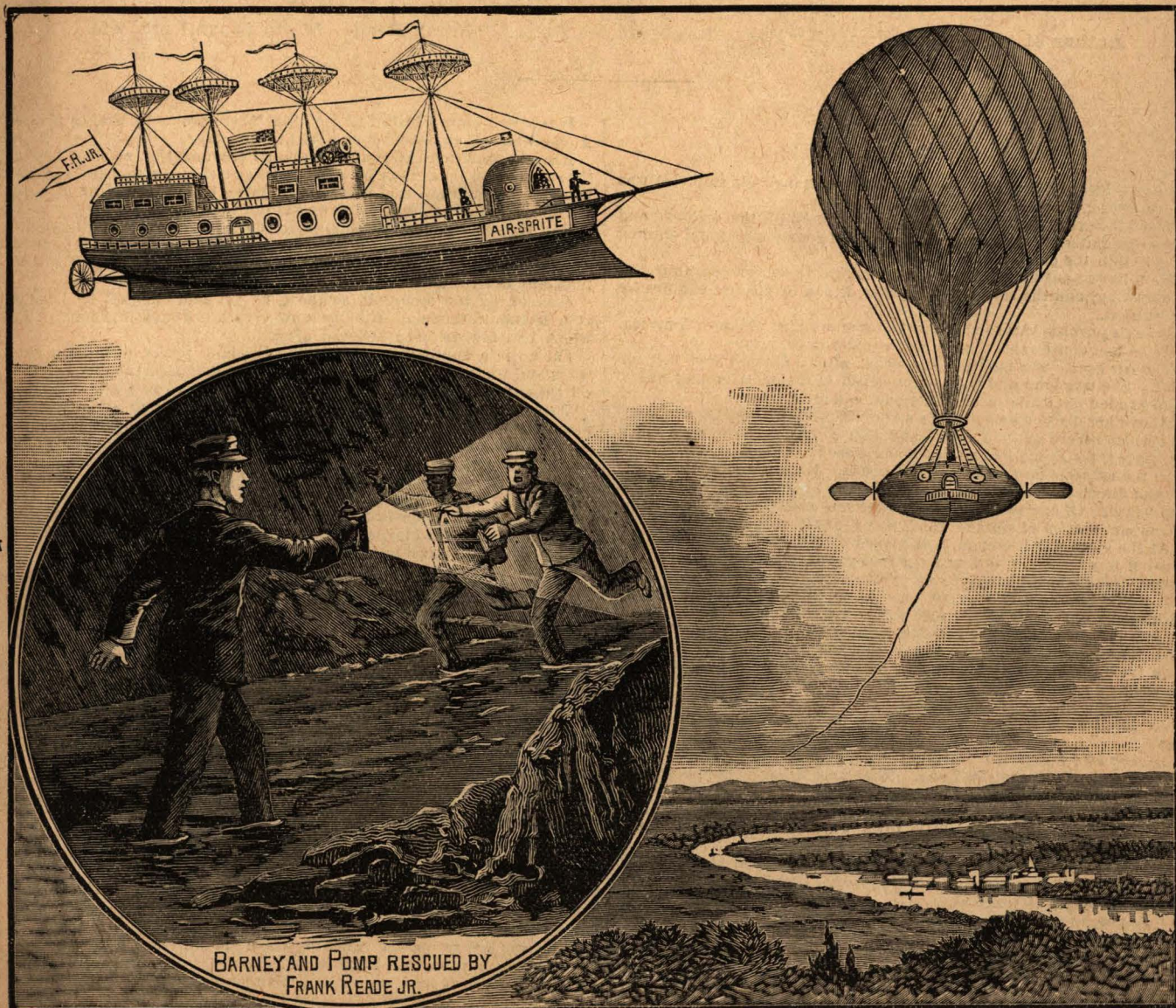
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THE CLOUD CITY:

Or, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Most Wonderful Discovery.

By "NONAME."



BARNEY AND POMP RESCUED BY
FRANK READE JR.

The air ship came slowly about and the balloon impelled by the air currents came rapidly nearer. The car was a huge cylindrical structure of wicker work, with small bull's-eyes windows of glass, and a square door which opened outward upon a balcony. Below the car hung a long piece of rope which had been broken, evidently the anchor having become lost thus.

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THE CLOUD CITY;

OR,

FRANK READE, JR.'S MOST WONDERFUL DISCOVERY.

A STORY OF AERIAL NAVIGATION.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Chasing a Pirate," "Frank Reade, Jr., in Cuba," "Frank Reade, Jr., in Japan," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

BOUND FOR THE ANDES.

FRANK READE, JR., had just completed his new air ship. It was the crowning effort of his career as an inventor.

The Air Sprite, as he christened it, was built of the lightest and strongest materials which he could find. Of course aluminum entered largely into the construction of the craft.

He followed out his pet theory of the revolving rotascope as a means of elevation, and the revolving propeller driven by electric engines for propulsion.

Frank's purpose was to visit the Andes mountains of South America. Why he had chosen this trip we will explain later.

The Air Sprite was modeled somewhat after a Government torpedo boat. She was long and with slight depth of hold. Her hull was of thinly rolled but bullet proof aluminum and steel.

Above her decks rose a double structure with plate glass windows, and which served as the forward and after cabins. These were richly appointed, for Frank had spared no expense in equipment.

In the extreme bow was the pilot house. Here the operator could sit and direct all movements of the air ship by means of an electric key board. Of course the motive power was electricity, generated by a compact system of storage which was Frank Reade, Jr.'s secret.

At the stern was the huge four bladed propeller. The power of ascension was furnished by four large rotascopes, placed upon revolving masts. These could be driven at great speed.

It would require a volume to give in detail all the wonderful appointments of the air ship, so we will not devote more time to the subject just now, but leave it to the incidents of our story to introduce from time to time. Suffice it to say, that the Air Sprite was equipped with arms and stores such as would be necessary for a long cruise in an enemy's country.

For Frank Reade, Jr., doubted not that they would meet foes in the unexplored wilds of South America. So he was resolved to be prepared.

Barney and Pomp, his traveling companions, were extremely enthusiastic over the proposed trip. They were never so happy as when traveling in some far part of the world with Frank Reade, Jr.

The Air Sprite had been built at Frank Reade, Jr.'s machine shops in Readestown, the smart little town where several generations of Reades had dwelt.

Frank Reade, Jr., was, of course, quite wealthy, for his inventions had brought him great quantities of money. So his trip to the Andes was not in quest of treasure.

But it was to establish the truth of a story more strange than human fancy can often picture.

This story had been given Frank by a celebrated South American traveler, Van Gay, who claimed to have witnessed the wonder with his own eyes.

Austin Van Gay was an Americanized Hollander, and a man of great talents. The story he told was a singular one.

It is a well known historical fact that there are many ranges of the Andes which have not been explored to this day.

Also the tradition exists among many Peruvians that small tribes of that wonderful Incas race yet exist in these out-of-the-way spots. Safe from the reach of civilized man, partly owing to the high altitude, they yet continue the habits and the worship of their forefathers.

Van Gay had conceived a powerful desire to ferret out these hidden people, and study their manners and customs for the benefit of science. So he had dared to ascend higher above the line of safety than any other traveler.

Assailed by the mountain sickness, he yet kept on until he beheld at a fortunate moment with his own eyes the wonderful Cloud City, which had always been believed a myth.

Far up in a cup-like depression of the giant peaks, were seen the walls and roofs of the Cloud City. It was seldom that the clouds were off these peaks long enough for the strange city to be seen.

There, according to tradition, dwelt a race of proud and arrogant people, whose counterpart did not exist on earth. They never descended from their upland pastures, where they herded goats and chamois and raised such vegetables as could be there cultivated.

Neither was it often that the white cloud pall ever cleared sufficiently from the mountain top to allow a view of the Cloud City from below, or to permit its denizens from looking down from their lofty eyrie.

There, among the clouds they had dwelt for centuries and it could be said that no known intercourse had been had with them.

Of course the curiosity and cupidity of Van Gay was greatly excited. Unable to reach the Cloud City by climbing, the exertion in such rarity of atmosphere creating mountain sickness, he had decided upon another course.

Returning to America, he had visited Frank Reade, Jr., just at a time when his Air Sprite was in a state of completion. Van Gay was delighted with the air ship, and cried:

"It is just what is required to reach the Cloud City. If you will undertake the exploit, Mr. Reade, you will aid to your fame as an explorer and render science a mighty favor."

Frank was at once interested in the project. After some consideration, he decided to verify the legend.

"I will go to South America with my air ship," he declared. "We will visit this wonderful Cloud City, and see what manner of people they are."

Van Gay was beside himself with delight.

He at once made all preparations for the trip, providing for every detail.

As the day of departure drew nearer great throngs of people gathered in Readestown.

All sorts of cranks besieged Frank.

The various proposals made by them in all sincerity, and their kind would have made a horse laugh.

Some of the cranks were really dangerous, and it became necessary for Frank to place detectives about the machine works. One of the cranks was captured with a dynamite bomb in his possession.

Finally the hour drew near for the sailing of the Air Sprite. The voyagers went aboard and the start was at once made. The huge rotascopes were started and the air ship leaped into space. Soon Readestown was but a speck among the distant hills below. Straight to the south Frank set his course.

It was a wonderful experience for Austin Van Gay, who had never before made an aerial voyage.

He could do nothing but sit by the rail and watch the great panorama below. It was an ever varying picture.

Hamlets, towns and cities passed in kaleidoscope order, and mountains, valleys and plains were blended.

The altitude at which the air ship sailed was even greater than that of the Andes, but the voyagers experienced no sickness therefrom. Which proves that the so-called mountain sickness is not wholly owing to altitude.

On sailed the air ship until finally night shut down over the landscape. Then the electric lights made all aglow and travel just as easy as in daylight.

Barney and Pomp were faithful at their duties. Barney looked after the electric engines and Pomp prepared an appetizing meal.

After this was over all sat out upon deck to enjoy the balmy air.

Pomp brought out his banjo and Barney his fiddle, and for a time they made things lively enough.

The trip had begun auspiciously as all agreed, and when the hour for retiring to rest came they were in high spirits. Barney and Pomp were to alternate as watchmen.

When morning came they were sailing over a part of Kentucky and still bearing to the southwest. Wonderful progress had been made.

Frank predicted that before another noon they would reach the Gulf. Tropical skies and atmosphere would then be in evidence.

It would not be a long sail from there to the upper spur of the Andes.

Van Gay paced the deck like an admiral, with head erect and shoulders square. He watched eagerly the southern horizon.

But that afternoon, as they were just entering upon the swampy lands of Louisiana, the first exciting incident of the voyage occurred.

Suddenly Barney sent up a loud yell from the pilot house.

"Och hone! Wud yez be afther coming here, Misther Frank? Shure, there's the devil to pay down yonder."

Frank rushed into the pilot house. He glanced through the plate glass window in the direction indicated by Barney. Then a sharp exclamation escaped his lips.

"By Jove, it is a balloon!"

Not five miles distant, and being driven toward them by the Gulf airs, was a huge balloon.

At that distance the car looked so small that little could be distinguished within it. But Frank snatched up a glass and brought it to bear upon it.

He gave an exclamation.

"That is queer! There seems to be nobody aboard! It is evidently a derelict."

Van Gay had by this time put in an excited appearance.

"What do you make of it, Frank?" he cried; "it looks as if somebody besides ourselves is trying aerial navigation."

"You are right," agreed the young inventor. "Let us see what use we can make of a signal."

With which Frank picked up a large flag and went aft to the highest mast. Here he ran the bunting up.

Up and down the mast he caused the flag to run rapidly, so as to attract the attention of those in the distant balloon.

But if the aeronauts saw it, they did not heed it, and finally Frank desisted, saying:

"It is my candid belief that there is no one in that car. It is a derelict balloon, beyond doubt."

"Jehu!" exclaimed Van Gay. "I am more than ever interested."

What shall we do about it, Frank?"

The young inventor did not at once make a reply to this question.

CHAPTER II.

THE STORY OF THE BALLOON.

FRANK was not the least interested of the party. The mystery of the balloon was a deep one.

He was determined to fathom it.

"Barney!" he shouted, "bear off a trifle to the west. Then hold the Sprite steady for a time."

"All roight, sor!"

The air ship came slowly about and the balloon impelled by the air currents came rapidly nearer.

It does not take a balloon long in such strong airs to travel five miles. As a result it was soon within a short distance of the Sprite.

Frank was cautious.

He knew the danger of fouling with the huge aerial vessel. It was the largest of the kind he had ever seen.

Nor was it like any other he or Van Gay had seen in its appointments. The globe was of some material unlike the usual oiled silk and yet seemingly as light and impervious to the elements.

The car was a huge cylindrical structure of wicker work, with small bull's-eyes windows of glass, and a square door which opened outward upon a small balcony. Below the car hung a long piece of rope which had been broken, evidently the anchor having become lost thus.

For some while our adventurers gazed upon the strange floating globe.

It was not easy to form any safe conjecture as to where it had come from or what was its errand in this part of the world. What had become of its voyagers was a mystery.

Of course nothing could be seen of the interior of the car, so that it could not be determined whether it was occupied or not.

If it was, then the occupants must be either dead or asleep. Else they must have become cognizant of the nearness of another aerial craft.

For a time Frank could not decide what to do.

It required no slight amount of maneuvering upon Barney's part to prevent the two air ships from fouling each other.

Attracted by the more powerful current created by the Sprite, the balloon followed it most tenaciously. Sometimes it rushed down upon the Sprite at frightful speed.

It was well known what would be the result of such a collision. Both vessels must be wrecked.

"If there is anybody in that car they ought to wake up!" cried Van Gay. "Why not hail them, Frank?"

"All right!" agreed the young inventor, "give them a shout!"

"Hello-o-o! Hello!" shouted Van Gay.

Again and again he sent the call across the intervening space. But no reply came back.

Here was a mystery.

Where were the aeronauts?

What strange balloon was this, where had it come from, what was its mission and how long had it been adrift? Frank was determined to know.

But the great problem now before him was how to solve the mystery. The first move of course was to visit the car.

But to do this was no easy task. It would not do to allow the balloon to come in too close proximity to the Sprite.

Frank studied the situation for some while. Then he decided upon a plan.

He went into the pilot-house and took the wheel from Barney. He pressed the rotascope valve, and the Sprite shot upward three hundred feet.

The balloon followed a short distance, then its buoyancy ceased and it returned to its level.

The problem was solved.

Frank gave the wheel to Barney and sprang out on deck. He picked up a long rope and threw it over the rail.

It descended to within reaching distance of the car of the balloon.

Frank secured the rope to the rail tightly.

Van Gay stared.

"What is all this?" he cried. "You are not going down on that rope, Frank?"

The young inventor smiled.

"I am," he replied.

"But—suppose it should break or you should lose your hold?"

"It will not break, and I shall not lose my grip," said Frank, lightly. "Come, Pomp. I want you to steady me."

"A'right, sah!"

With this, Frank swung himself over the rail. He was as nimble as any sailor.

Down he went, and Van Gay watched him with starting eyeballs. But Frank did not fall.

His nerve was fully equal to the occasion, and soon he had reached the loop at the end of the rope. This he slipped under his arms and felt secure.

But now the question arose as to how he was to reach the car of the balloon.

The angle was such that the balloon's eclipse prevented his accomplishing this end in the ordinary manner. Meanwhile the great globe of gas would keep swinging about in the air currents, and it required Barney's best efforts to keep the Sprite near the balloon.

But Frank now shouted:

"Hello, Pomp!"

The darky leaned over the rail.

"Yas, sah!"

"Bear on the rope and swing it toward the balloon."

Pomp caught the idea.

"A'right, sah!"

The darky followed Frank's instructions, and Frank swung nearer to the car of the balloon. Again and again he swung in toward it.

Then with a quick move he grasped the wicker work and held on. Without removing the rope from his shoulders he opened the wicker door of the car and glanced in.

It was a remarkable sight which met his gaze.

The compartment, of course, was small, but it held a surprising number of appointments and fixtures. But there was no human occupant.

It was then after all, a derelict, and in very truth a floating mystery. Perhaps the car contained an explanation of this. Frank was determined to know.

So he dropped down into the little compartment. In its center was a small table of light wicker work.

Upon this were volumes, paper and writing materials. A couple of very tiny and light chairs rested against it.

One wall of the car held shelves upon which were scientific instruments. On another side were cooking utensils. In a small canopy above was the generator and regulator which furnished gas for the balloon.

Against a cushioned seat leaned a couple of handsome rifles. Also

in the roof above and to one side of the generator was a powerful telescope.

Frank took in all these things and could form but one conclusion.

This was that the missing aeronauts were scientists. Doubtless they had set forth upon some voyage of research, and owing to some accident, perhaps the breaking of the anchor rope, the balloon had got away from them.

This was a plausible theory, and in lieu of a better one, Frank was constrained to accept it. But who were the aeronauts, and of what nationality?

He looked about him for an answer to this question and his gaze fell upon the papers on the table.

At once he proceeded to examine them.

There were scientific notes and meteorological records, but soon Frank hit upon a bundle of manuscript which was labeled:

"Log of the balloon, Cruiser."

Frank turned to the page, and read:

"This is the log of the chemical balloon, Cruiser, the invention of Howard Stearns and Professor Alexander Bent, of Black Creek, Michigan, U. S. A. We are bound by means of traverse aerial currents for South America to cross the Andes at their greatest altitude."

Then followed voluminous notes and observations, which Frank passed hastily over until he came to a startling entry. Thus it read:

"To-day, the seventh of February we hit upon a wonderful discovery. For weeks we have sailed over various ranges of the mighty Andes. But this morning at an early hour, the clouds for a few moments broke from the summit of a certain great peak, and we beheld a great valley deep among the crags.

"It was very green and fertile and was covered with what seemed like great fields of maize and other grains known to the natives of the lower plains. But the astounding feature was the fact that the valley held rude habitations and human beings could be seen.

"At the distance we could distinguished little of their personnel, but they seemed of great stature and giant frame. I should say the valley among the peaks was twenty miles in length by five miles in breadth. But the wonderful spectacle was a white city right on a great cliff on the topmost height of the Andes.

"My companion, Professor Bent, is very anxious to make their acquaintances, and if we can navigate the balloon close enough to the city, we will descend and try to fathom this mystery of a city and a people so far up in the clouds."

Here the journal ended. Frank Reade, Jr.'s interest was, it need hardly be said, of the most intense description.

"Great guns!" he ejaculated, "here is a mystery as well as a revelation. Other aerial voyagers have visited the Cloud City. But how did the balloon get away up here in North America, after sailing so far to the south? It is the peculiarity of the aerial currents. Will not Van Gay be amazed when he reads this."

Frank looked about the balloon car and took several small articles which he thought might be of use for purposes of identification.

He placed the journal in his pocket carefully, and then climbed out of the car. He waved his hand to Pomp far above, and then swung clear of the balloon.

The great globe swung away, and after the line had ceased its gyrations, Frank began to ascend hand over hand.

Up he went to the rail of the air ship and sprang upon the deck.

He was met by Van Gay, who was wildly excited, and cried:

"By Jerusalem! I'm glad you're back, Frank! You know I wouldn't have given a cent for your chances down there. It looked pretty shaky to me."

Frank laughed.

"You did not know that I was such an acrobat, did you?"

"Indeed not!"

"That was a very slight feat. But—I know you are anxious to know what was in the car of that balloon."

"Well, I should say so!" cried Van Gay.

"No dead men anyway," assured Frank. "The car contained no occupant."

"Derelect?"

"Just so!"

"Golly!" cried Pomp, unable to restrain his surprise; "wha' eber became ob de people wha' owned dat balloon?"

"That is a mystery which we must solve," replied Frank, "and we have only this very slight clew to guide us."

He drew from his pocket the journal which he had secured a few moments before.

CHAPTER III.

THE CASTAWAY.

VAN GAY was perhaps the most excited of the group, but even Barney came out of the pilot house to take a look at the journal. Frank handed it to Van Gay, and said:

"You may read the first and last entries aloud. The balance of the journal is of little interest to us just now."

Van Gay complied with this request. He read the entries aloud. For a moment there was astonished and profound silence.

"Begorra!" exclaimed Barney, finally, "did yez iver hear the loikes av that?"

"Lan' ob goodness! Dat beats de hull world!"

Van Gay leaned over the rail and looked at the balloon.

"How the deuce did it get back here?" he asked in amazement.

"That is easy," replied Frank; "this last entry was made in February. It has had ample time to travel hither by means of shifting air currents. It is, however, a curious fact."

"I should say so! But that does not explain the fate of the aeronauts."

"We can easily guess that."

"Ah!"

"It is a simple matter to assume that the two aeronauts descended with the balloon into the valley in the Andes."

"Sure!"

"What would be easier than that they should anchor their balloon. Next, they may have failed to make friendly terms with the natives, who cut the anchor rope and let the balloon fly away!"

"All that is possible," agreed Van Gay, "or a heavy gale may have parted the rope."

"Exactly!"

"In either case, what of the aeronauts?"

Frank arose.

"We are going to the Cloud City," he said, "and we will make it our business to find out."

Barney turned a flip-flap and Pomp stood on his head. Here was something to look forward to.

But Van Gay leaned over the rail, and cried:

"What shall we do with the balloon, Frank?"

"Nothing," replied the young inventor. "Look, yon!"

To the astonishment of all, it was seen that the great globe was sinking. Its silken sides were drawing in. Its life had reached a termination.

A leak had allowed the gas to find its way out of the globe, and downward it was sinking to its fate.

Far below was a great Louisiana marsh. In this it could never be found or recovered.

The voyagers watched it until it fell into the mire and ooze and sank from view. All drew a deep breath and left the rail.

"Now," cried Van Gay. "Ho for the Andes!"

Barney sprang to the pilot house and once more the air ship was under way. A few hours later the delta of the great Mississippi was in view.

This was a wonderful spectacle. There were the great areas of drift and mire, brought thousands of miles from the upper waters of the great river.

There also were the famous jetties, built by a famous engineer. Vessels of all descriptions were being piloted safely through these marvels of engineering skill.

That the air ship attracted attention was certain, for sailors on the vessels gazed aloft and even sent up signal flags to the masthead.

Thus the Air Sprite passed on out over the waters of the Gulf. The voyagers now began to feel as if they were really on their way to the Andes.

Frank set a straight course for the great promontory of Yucatan. Then night shut down just as the land faded from view on the horizon.

The Air Sprite, however, was quite able to travel after dark, for the search-light threw its rays fully a mile ahead. Then again there was no danger of collision at that height in the air.

The air was clear and fresh, the sky star-studded and bright.

Our voyagers enjoyed fully this evening over the Gulf. They sat out on deck until a late hour.

The Air Sprite sailed steadily on. Every moment drew them now nearer to that South American land of wonder, which they were all so anxious to see.

Van Gay had been sitting near the rail, engaged in smoking a fine cigar. Suddenly he turned his head with a violent start.

"What was that?" he ejaculated.

"Eh?" exclaimed Frank.

Van Gay looked over the rail down to the dim water fully a thousand feet below.

"On my word," he cried, "I could take my oath that I heard a cry for help!"

Frank was at once interested.

"Do you think so?" he cried, springing up. "Lower the ship, Barney!"

"All right, sor!"

The Celt sprang into the pilot-house, for the wheel was lashed, and at once the Sprite began to descend.

And then, quite plainly to the hearing of all, came a distant faint cry of distress.

There was no vessel or craft of any kind in sight.

This increased the mystery, and added incentive to the investigation. If there was a human being in distress below, he must be adrift upon a plank or other buoyant object.

Down sank the air ship, and Barney began to throw the rays of the search-light about over the water.

Van Gay shouted loudly. Some time elapsed, then a distant faint cry was heard.

"It's off there!" cried Frank; "bear away to the south, Barney!"

The Celt obeyed.

The air ship was now hardly fifty feet above the swelling waters.

It glided and suddenly Barney cried:

"Dead ahead, sor, an' a man on a dhriftn' spha!"

All strained their gaze with this, and as a result it was seen that Barney was right.

There was plainly visible, tossing about in the tumbling waters, a

human being clinging to a mast. His white upturned face could be plainly distinguished agonized and despairing.

While once more, and this time much fainter, came the call:

"Help! Oh, God, give me help!"

"Ay, ay!" shouted Frank; "hold on bravely, my man. We are coming!"

Down swept the air ship until it was right over the castaway. Then Frank threw one end of a long rope overboard.

The next moment and before anything more could be said or done he went over the rail. Down the rope he slid.

As he struck the water, he grasped the exhausted castaway by the right arm. He saw that the man had but little strength left.

So he cried reassuringly:

"Bear up, my man! You are safe!"

"Heaven be praised!" breathed the other. "I was about to give up!"

"Don't think of that. Now follow my directions. Put your arm around the rope—so! Now, under the shoulder!"

Deftly Frank made a noose under the man's arms. He had scarcely done so when the other's head fell upon his shoulder.

He had fainted.

Frank shouted loudly:

"All right up there. Haul away!"

Barney and Pomp and Van Gay all gave way at the line and Frank and his burden were drawn swiftly up.

Over the rail they were safely brought. Tender hands picked the unconscious castaway up and carried him into the cabin.

He was placed upon a couch and restoratives were applied. It was now seen that he was a fine-looking man of middle age and possessed of intellectual features.

How he chanced to be drifting thus on a spar in the waters of the gulf it was not easy to guess. To ascertain this they must wait until he came to.

And this did not happen for some while. Indeed, for a time it seemed as if the weak and wasted body must succumb.

But after much hard work Frank succeeded in bringing a quiver to the sunken eyelids, and then the castaway for the first time since coming aboard manifested signs of life.

"Heigho!" cried Van Gay, "he is coming out all right. Poor fellow! He must have suffered much!"

"You are right," agreed Frank, as he placed a fresh blanket over the sufferer. "Now for a little stimulant and later some nourishment and he will soon be with the living."

Within an hour the rescued man was able to sit up weakly and talk. His story was a thrilling one.

"My name is James Leclair," he said. "My home is in Belize, Honduras. I sailed from there for New York aboard the steamer La Carib. We were not a day out of port when fire broke out in the engine room of the steamer. We fought it as long as we could. But it overcame our efforts and the boats were put out. I was one of the last to leave the steamer and was compelled to cling to a drifting spar, as the boats were given up to the women."

"But just at that moment a gale came sweeping down upon us. The steamer went down at the first blast. What became of the boats I cannot say. For two days and nights I have been buffeted about by wind and waves."

"At times I have almost yielded to an impulse to sink beneath the cruel waves and end my misery. But I hung on doggedly, and—thanks to you, my kind friends, I am saved."

"We are glad to be of service to you," said Frank.

Then Leclair looked curiously about the cabin. He pressed a hand over his eyes and said:

"It is all like a dream. Pardon me, friends, but as I was hauled aboard, this ship seemed suspended in the air. Was it only my fancy?"

"By no means," replied Frank. "This is the air ship, Sprite. We are from Readestown and bound for South America."

Leclair seemed surprised; but he only said:

"Then you will pass near Belize?"

"Yes."

"It is my home. Would you mind putting me down there?"

"It is our purpose," replied Frank.

"God bless you! You are good and kind to me. I have heard of air ships, but this is the first time I have ever seen one."

"I will be glad to show you its appointments on the morrow," replied Frank. "You will be stronger then."

"I shall be glad," said Leclair.

Then he fell asleep.

But when the morrow came it brought a tragic happening, which came near to putting an end to the South American project and the lives of all.

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

VAN GAY had kindly volunteered to watch by the bedside of the castaway. For a bit of fever seemed about the man.

He talked strangely in his restless sleep, but yet did not arouse until daylight came.

Then Pomp brought up a nourishing repast for him, and Frank relieved Van Gay. The young inventor noticed that the castaway's eyes were strangely brilliant and seemed to dance in his head.

He appeared also to be curiously morose and abstract, at times not heeding remarks addressed him.

But Frank attributed this wholly to physical weakness.

"He will come out of that as he grows stronger," he said.

Leclair seemed to have no inclination to leave his bunk. Toward noon he fell into what seemed like a refreshing sleep.

As he appeared to be sleeping soundly, Frank ventured to leave him and go on deck.

They were just passing over White Gull island, a curious sort of Cay near the west coast of Cuba. From here to the Gulf of Honduras the course was sou'-west.

The isle presented a wild and desolate appearance.

There was a tradition that it had once been a resort of Morgan and his buccaneers. Many parties had dug the island over in quest of buried gold.

"If we had time!" cried Van Gay, "I would like nothing better than to stop here a while, Frank!"

"I fear we should lose time," said the young inventor. "We may be able to do so on our way home!"

"That will do as well," said Van Gay with delight. "Jericho! what was that?"

Frank gave a great start, and Barney rushed out of the pilot-house. From the cabin there had come a wild eerie cry.

It was such as could come from only one kind of person.

And that was a madman.

Then all beheld a strange sight.

In the cabin door for a moment stood the half nude form of Leclair the castaway. But his appearance was awfully changed.

His hair was disheveled, his features distorted. The stamp of the maniac was upon him.

It was a moment of horror.

Not one of the Sprite's crew could think or act in that moment. One horrible fact was impressed upon them, and this was that the fearful strain upon Leclair's nerves had driven him mad.

It might be only a temporary fit, but in any event it was possible for him to do himself or others much harm.

Frank was the first to act.

"Mercy on us!" he gasped; "the poor wretch is mad! Watch him, that he does not jump overboard!"

"Easy," cried Van Gay; "try an easy method. Pacify him if you can!"

Barney, by Frank's gesture, worked quietly along behind the cabin. Pomp was in the stern.

Van Gay went along the port-rail, and Frank approached leisurely in front. Leclair seemed not to see them.

"Oh, ye blue fire devils!" he cried, incoherently, "ye think to burn my soul! There's water enough here to quench all the fires of Hades! Curse ye all! I go to join my brouther in the clouds!"

With a wild, awful laugh he advanced toward the rail. Below, full half a mile, were the rocky crags of Gull Island.

Frank put out a hand appealingly. The maniac paused. He glared at the other blankly.

"Let us have a talk first, Leclair," Frank said, in a persuasive way. "I think the clouds are waiting for us down here. Let us see."

And Frank indicated the cabin stairway.

For a moment the madman's face softened. He whimpered like a child, and Frank even was able to place a hand on his arm.

"You are my brother!" said Leclair, in a purring way. "I cannot forget our school days. Ah! see yonder devil grinning there! Curse him! let me at him!"

With a shriek the madman burst from Frank. He drove his body with great force against the cabin wall. The shock seemed to, for a moment, stun him and he fell back.

Frank tried to seize him, but quick as a cat he wheeled and dodged to the left. One moment he cringed in the center of the deck. Then with a yell of awful terror he started for the pilot-house.

"Look out for him!" shouted Frank.

"That I will, sor!" cried Barney.

And the Celt made a dash for the unfortunate man. But he was not quick enough for that.

With an eerie laugh Leclair sprang into the pilot house. Barney was after him like a deer.

But quick as he was, Leclair was quicker. All the cunning of the madman was his.

With a lightning-like movement he shut and bolted the door behind him. Barney fell against it, just too late.

In an instant all four of the aerial voyagers reached the spot. Horror was upon their faces.

It was a fearful realization.

The air ship was completely in the hands of the madman. There before him and at his fiendish mercy was the keyboard, and all the delicate electrical machinery of the ship.

It would have been an easy matter for him in that moment to have destroyed or damaged the machinery so that death would have been brought swiftly upon all on board, for the fall of a mile to the earth would have assured this.

"My soul!" gasped Van Gay; "we are in a scrape now! How shall we get out of it?"

There was a way into the pilot-house through the cabin. Barney now started for this.

But he might as well have saved himself the trouble.

In the pilot-house Leclair turned and made fierce grimaces and gestures through the glass.

Frank tried to soothe him, but in vain.

He was furious to the last degree.

He raved about the place wildly. His yells and cries were something fearful.

"Heaven help us!" cried Van Gay, suddenly. "He is at the keyboard!"

This was seen to be the startling truth. The maniac had caught sight of the white-keyed table. It had at once excited his cupidity.

At once he began trifling with the keys. The effect was startling.

Through some chance the air ship began to descend. Fortunately it fell slowly as the current was light. But every electric bell on board began to ring and everything was in a furor.

Van Gay rushed to the rail and looked over.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried; "we are going to drop on the island. It is all right, Frank. There is no danger of drowning."

This was encouraging, to be sure, but the fact yet remained that the pilot house was in the possession of the maniac, who had the power to effectually ruin the machinery.

Of course this was an appalling realization, for it meant an end most disastrous to the South American trip.

Down settled the air ship until the sandy wastes of the White Gull island were but a few hundred feet below. Then a startling thing happened.

Barney had gone to gain admittance to the pilot house from below. But the madman had preceded him.

Leaving the keyboard, he had apparently caught sight of the stairs leading down to the engine room. At once his cupidity was again excited and down these he sprang.

Into the engine-room he dashed. With a wild glance about he singled out the live dynamo with its shower of flying sparks. It proved a fatal attraction.

It was at that moment that Barney arrived in the room. He saw the maniac's purpose and shouted:

"Howd on, yez crazy coat! It'll be the death av yez! Whist! Arrah, it's all over wid him!"

The Celt reeled back in horror. It was truly all over with poor Leclair.

Drawn by the flashing sparks he had grasped the dynamo with both hands. What followed is beyond description.

Death was certainly instantaneous. When the others gained admittance a few moments later, his mangled body was found jammed in between the electric storage coils.

The air ship had struck the earth and rested securely upon a bank of sand. The voyagers first looked to the safety of the Sprite, then they brought the remains of poor Leclair out on deck.

It was a sad scene, and all were much affected. But the best that could be done was to give the unfortunate man a grave on the isle.

"I will communicate with his folks at the first opportunity," said Frank. "That is all we can do."

"Nothing more," agreed Van Gay. "I am not much of a parson, but I think I can say a short prayer over his grave. Poor fellow!"

The air ship was anchored, while Barney and Pomp prepared a shroud.

Then a grave was dug on a slight eminence near.

This overlooked the sea, and not a half mile distant was a capacious harbor, which Van Gay at once noted.

He called Frank's attention to it.

"Perhaps that is where Morgan made an anchorage," he said. "It looks large enough for a fleet of vessels."

"It may be," agreed Frank.

The body had been brought out on an impromptu bier.

Barney and Pomp had already fashioned the grave to a depth of four feet.

Two feet more would be deemed sufficient. But at that moment a strange thing happened.

A loud shout went up, and then Barney and Pomp disappeared from view. Astounded, Van Gay and Frank looked at each other.

Then they rushed to the grave.

It was a most astonishing spectacle which met their gaze. The two grave diggers were not to be seen. An awful dark aperture yawned where the bottom of the grave had been.

For a moment neither Frank nor Van Gay could act.

"Jericho!" exclaimed the latter, "have they gone to the center of the earth?"

Then Frank recovered himself.

He rushed forward and threw himself down upon the verge of the abyss. All was dark below. He listened intently.

Then he shouted:

"Hello! Where are you, Barney?"

Again and again he shouted. Van Gay did the same.

But no answer came.

All was silence and darkness. The two men appalled exchanged glances.

"I tell you it's a deep hole!" cried Van Gay; "it's one of these cursed coral isles which are so fearfully honeycombed. They have gone down to death."

CHAPTER V.

BARNEY AND POMP'S ADVENTURES.

FRANK was not inclined to dispute Van Gay. In fact, he rather was disposed to agree with him.

It was by no means an unfeasible theory. These islands of the semitropics were often of coral origin and honeycombed as he said.

It was quite possible that Barney and Pomp had fallen into one of these cells and possibly were at the bottom of a deep underground sea, or dashed to pieces hundreds of feet below.

So great was the horror of the two explorers that a cold sweat broke out over each.

"It is too awful!" groaned Frank; "how unfortunate that we landed on this accursed isle!"

"Indeed that is true!"

"But we must not give up hope!"

"What can we do?"

"One of us must go down there!"

Van Gay looked surprised.

"How?" he asked.

"Wait here!" said Frank. "I am going back to the air ship for a rope!"

In a few moments the young inventor returned with a long coil of rope. Van Gay began to pull off his coat.

"Hold on!" said Frank. "I am going down there myself."

"You had better let me go!"

"No," objected Frank. "I wish to go myself."

So Van Gay gave way and Frank quickly prepared to make a descent into the unknown depths.

Near by was the trunk of a large tree, about this Frank fastened one end of the rope and made a noose of the other.

Then he threw the end of the rope into the cavity. In his hand he carried an electric lantern.

"If you do not come back what shall I do?" asked Van Gay.

"Take the air ship and go back to Yankee land for help," replied Frank.

The next moment he slid down into the cavity. Van Gay saw the star of light go down and down. Then it flickered and grew dim.

He drew a deep breath.

"He has got to the end of the rope," he muttered.

Then he waited and listened.

The light flickered and grew dim and vanished. Van Gay grew alarmed as time went on.

"Jericho," he exclaimed, "I don't like it a bit! Why don't Frank answer?"

He grew very nervous.

At last he consulted his watch. It had been forty minutes since Frank had slid into that hole in the earth.

"It's all wrong," muttered Van Gay, and he glanced toward the air ship. The impulse was half upon him to follow Frank's instructions and go for help.

He leaned over the edge and again shouted.

No answer came.

Then Van Gay pulled on the rope. It was loose and held no weight at its end. With a chill of horror he pulled it all up.

Frank Reade, Jr. was not at the end of it. But one conclusion could be formed by him.

In his excited state he fancied that Frank Reade, Jr. had lost his grip and fallen, perhaps to the center of the earth. The spell of horror upon him was intense.

His mind was settled.

He would take the air ship and go back to America; so he made a rush for it, without recalling the fact that the maniac Leclair had tampered with the intricate machinery.

Neither was he quite sure that he understood the key-board; but he was desperate.

Something must be done.

As he passed the bier upon which lay the body of Leclair he gave a start.

Here was another matter for consideration.

Overhead a great flock of buzzards hovered, ready to descend and make a horrible feast upon the corpse. It ought to be put under ground.

Van Gay hesitated.

Then he looked about for a spade. As he did so an astounding sight met his gaze.

A hundred yards distant three men appeared from behind a sand dune and advanced toward him with a loud shout.

He rubbed his eyes.

"Jericho!" he gasped. "Am I dreaming?"

But he speedily became assured of the fact that he was not. The three men were no others than Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp.

When the ground gave way beneath them and they fell such a distance, Barney and Pomp escaped death by a literal miracle.

They fell to their waists into a depth of soft mud and ooze. This broke their fall. All was darkness about them save a dim circle of light far above.

"Whurroo!" gasped Barney, as soon as he recovered from the shock. "Phwere the devil are we anyway, naygur?"

"Golly fo' glory!" stuttered the negro, "'pears to me like we've done fell to de berry center ob de year!"

They floundered about in the ooze and finally succeeded in crawling out upon a bit of terra firma.

This was some yards away from the spot where they had fallen and was far under a cavern roof. They could not see the light of day above them, and the cavern depths prevented their hearing the shouts of Frank and Van Gay so far above.

But what they did see was a faint star of light in the distance through the cavern. Barney was the first to make a suggestion after they emerged from the ooze.

"Be me sowl, naygur," he gasped, "we are sthuck now! We niver kin get back that way we come."

"Huh!" cried Pomp, "don' yo' worry 'bout dat. Marse Frank, he neber leave us down yere, an' don' yo' fink he will."

"Begorra, he won't av his own free will, to be shure. But supposin' he can't help himself? Phwat thin?"

"Marse Frank am able to do most anything, I tell yo', chile."

"I'll not dispute yez there, naygur. But it looks off yonder, as if there was a way out av this place, an' be me sowl, I'm fer thryin' it!"

Pomp hesitated. By this time they had scraped the mud from their garments as well as they could see to do it in the darkness.

All was Stygian gloom about them. There was nothing to indicate as yet, that any attempt was to be made for their rescue.

Both went as near the edge of the pit of ooze as they dared, and shouted loudly. But they were not heard, nor could they hear anything in reply.

This settled matters.

They were decided to at once make the best of the situation, and try what seemed to be the only avenue of escape from the place now open. So they set out for the distant patch of daylight, which showed that there was another means of exit from the place.

"Phwat sort av a place do yez reckon we've fallen into?" asked Barney, as they felt their way cautiously along the passage.

"Massy Lordy! I done reckon it am some b'ar's cave," replied Pomp. "An' we'se jes' gwine to be lucky if we don' fall in wif some terrible wild animals yit."

Barney laughed at this.

"Be jabbers, that's jest a naygur's idee," he cried. "Shure, it's more loikely some part av the island that was once a coral reef undher the sea."

As they had not even a match with which to dispel the darkness, they were obliged to feel their way through the dark recesses of the cavern. This made it slow work, for they were constantly in fear of falling into a pit.

Nor had they gone far when Barney splashed into water. He retreated with a cry of alarm.

"Howly murther!" he gasped, "don't yez go any further, naygur! Shure if yez do, it's drownded yez will be!"

Brought to a halt thus, the two terrified men stood in dismay and indecision. The cavern opening did not seem to be so very far away.

But just at that moment and while despair seemed to overwhelm them, both were given a startling surprise. A distant loud shout came to their ears.

Instinctively they turned about. In the distance, and the direction from which they had come they saw a gleam of electric light.

"Misther Frank!" shouted Barney, wildly. "Whurrool it's saved we are, naygur!"

Both could have stood on their heads with delight at the moment. But they were not sure of a good footing for that purpose.

It was indeed Frank Reade, Jr. who had come down by the rope as we have seen. He had an electric lantern with him which lit up the place quite clearly.

It is needless to say that Barney and Pomp quickly answered his call.

In a very short space of time they were again united.

Frank had experienced some trouble in getting through the pit of mud; but he had succeeded, and was glad to hear a reply to his call.

He knew then that Barney and Pomp were safe.

As Frank hastened to meet them he was impressed with a startling fact.

The rays of the lantern smote sharply upon walls of sandstone, laid evenly and in an arch. This was not the work of nature, but the device of man.

Then he remembered the traditions of the island, that it had once been the retreat of Morgan and his buccaneers. What more logical than that they had stumbled upon the much sought treasure cave?

Certainly it was a skillfully concealed hiding place. The pit into which Barney and Pomp had fallen was undoubtedly a concealed entrance.

That there was another entrance seemed evident from the fact that a distant gleam of daylight could be seen just ahead.

Barney and Pomp were overwhelmed with joy at the appearance of Frank Reade, Jr., on the scene.

They fairly embraced him in their frenzy of delight.

"Fo' de lan's sakes, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp. "I done fo't we had seed de las' ob yo' an' de air ship."

Frank laughed at this.

"I rather guess not," he said, "but do I not see daylight ahead?"

"Yis, sor!" replied Barney, "but shure there's wather atwixt us an' it."

"Water?" exclaimed Frank. "Well, we'll, explore a little in that direction presently. Any way out of this place is better than the way we came in. But first, what sort of a den have we dropped into anyway?"

"Bejabbers, we war afther thinkin' it was the center of the earth!" declared Barney. "Shure I reckon it's some natural cavern, sor!"

"No!" said Frank, decisively, "it is nothing of the kind. This place was fashioned by the hand of man!"

And he flashed the light of the electric lantern upon the well laid arch of sandstone.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TREASURE CHAMBER.

BARNEY and Pomp were astonished beyond measure at the revelation.

They gazed at this evidence of man's former presence here, in sheer bewilderment.

"Howly smoke," cried Barney, "shure it's all walled up as foine as yez plazel!"

"Golly, dat warn't neber done by nature," declared Pomp.

"No," agreed Frank, "it never was. Man certainly at some time found domicile here. Who he was and what his purpose it is for us to learn!"

"Whurrool!" cried Barney. "Av coorse it is! But Misther Van Gay—"

"I don't think he will be alarmed," said Frank. "At least he can do nothing but stay where he is."

With this Frank began to examine carefully the interior of the underground structure.

This resulted in a startling surprise. Something white and ghastly lay half buried in a heap of sand. It was nothing more nor less than a human skeleton.

The bones crumbled to decay at the slightest touch, which was evidence that they had been long in the place. Perhaps they were remains of some one of Morgan's piratical crew.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young inventor, excitedly; "I believe we have really come upon the hiding place of the buccaneers' treasure."

Barney and Pomp were much excited and followed Frank through the place. A side passage was soon discovered.

This extended but a few feet and terminated in what seemed to be an iron door, but perforated with rust. Frank touched it and it fell in a shower of iron dust.

Beyond, the electric lantern showed a square apartment walled up as the rest. Its contents were hideous and suggestive of dark deeds.

For upon the rocky floor there lay half a dozen skeletons.

Not a vestige of their clothing remained by which to possibly identify their nationality. Time had long since effaced this.

But across each skeleton were the rusted traces of broken swords; and Barney picked up several gold coins. They were Spanish doubloons.

This settled all doubt in Frank's mind.

That this had once been a stronghold for Spanish treasure seemed certain. It was to guess how the skeletons came here.

Morgan's men were desperate cut-throats, and probably after their leader's death had come here to claim the treasure, and had quarreled and fought to the death over it, the survivors carrying off the gold.

For not a vestige of it could be found. Frank turned away.

"Morgan's treasure is a myth!" he said. "Come, let us get on our way once more for the Andes."

Back down the corridor they now went until they came to the water which had barred the progress of Barney and Pomp.

With the aid of the electric lantern it was now seen easily that the barrier was caused by an influx of water from the sea, caused by a slight depression in the floor of the cavern.

But the dry floor could be seen beyond, and Frank plunged into the water, crying:

"We may have to swim, boys, but we must cross just the same. Here goes!"

Barney and Pomp followed.

But the water did not rise above their shoulders and they soon crossed in safety. They were now not far from the entrance to the place, which they could see merged upon the sandy beach.

Pushing on, they soon came to a crevice, through which they crept and stood upon the shore of the isle. The waves of the gulf rolled at their feet.

Then it was seen that the entrance to the buccaneers' cave had not long been open as it now was.

A heavy tide had probably carried away a large bowlder which covered the aperture and which lay near by.

But the place had now lost its interest to our adventurers, and they thought only of getting back to the air ship.

Frank led the way over the cliff and they were soon in sight of the Sprite. They also saw Van Gay just as he was looking for the spade with which to dig a new grave.

In a few moments all were united, and matters were mutually explained.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank, "if you had gone off with the air ship what would have become of us, Van Gay?"

The other looked crestfallen.

"It was a foolish thought," he declared. "I don't see what put it into my head. I must have been rattled."

There was no inclination to remain longer on the island. So a new grave was dug into which the remains of the unfortunate man were placed.

No stone was placed to mark the spot, but Frank and Van Gay took such measurements that it could be easily located if there should ever be need.

Then all went aboard the Air Sprite.

They were exceedingly anxious to once more get under way for the Andes, if the machinery was not so damaged that they would be compelled to abandon the attempt.

Frank made a long and critical examination and finally, to the joy of all, announced:

"It is all right! I shall have it in working order very quickly."

And his promise was verified. In a few hours the Air Sprite was once more aloft and headed for Southern lands.

They sailed over the eastern part of Yucatan and entered the Bay of Honduras. Then, lying over toward Jamaica, they entered the Caribbean Sea.

In another day's sail the South American Continent was in view. Frank took his bearings and declared that the distant land in view was that of lower Panama.

"We shall soon see the shores of Colombia," he said. "We may then be fairly entered upon our exploration of the crest of the Andes."

Van Gay was much pleased. Nothing in the distant view escaped his gaze.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he would declare. "We could have traveled hither in no way so incomparable!"

As nightfall was at hand, it was for a time undecided just what to do. Finally Frank concluded to make for the distant coast of Colombia and anchor for the night.

Van Gay was very desirous of seeing the entire Southern land, and as the air ship could have covered fully one hundred miles before daylight this much would be lost.

So the air-ship bore down for the coast and anchored over a high bluff. Below could be seen waving palms and tropical vegetation, while the sea ran in upon a sandy beach.

But there was no sign of human habitation.

Whether this was a deserted part of the coast or not could not be determined at that late hour. It would be necessary to wait for daylight.

Frank did not descend, but threw out an anchor which held the air ship firm and steady. Then the aerial navigators proceeded to wait for daylight.

They sat out on deck until a late hour, enjoying the balmy air. When at last the time came for turning in Frank Reade, Jr., said:

"You will go on watch the first half of the night, Barney. Pomp will relieve you at two o'clock."

"All right, sor."

But Van Gay stepped forward and said:

"Pardon me, Frank, but may I ask the privilege of going on Barney's watch to-night—that is, providing he does not object?"

Frank looked surprised.

"You!" he exclaimed.

Van Gay bowed.

"Certainly," he replied; "I am serious."

"Why—of course, if you have really that desire," said Frank.

"Barney, Mr. Van Gay will take your watch to-night."

The Celt looked surprised, as did Pomp. But he fell back, and the subject dropped.

A short while later Van Gay was alone on the deck.

The night was as black as a pocket, and a southing wind blew from the sea; but Van Gay did not mind this.

There was the search-light, which could be used at any time, if need be, to dispel this gloom.

Van Gay enjoyed the situation keenly.

He paced the deck in a jubilant frame of mind. He knew that he could not have slept even if he had retired.

He was thinking constantly and with great eagerness of the possibility of paying a visit to the wonderful Cloud City, which few men had ever seen, and none had ever visited.

He was elated beyond measure with the opportunities placed within his reach. He would be the envied of all scientists and explorers the world over.

It was no light thing to consider that he was really the discoverer of an unknown race. That it might be a link of some valuable sort.

And thus time passed and he continued to pace the deck. Suddenly he heard a peculiar sound in the distance.

He listened with a start.

Then he looked up at the darkened sky. Something wet splashed on his face.

"A storm!" he exclaimed. "Certainly that was distant thunder!"

For a moment he hesitated. It might not be necessary to notify Frank Reade, Jr., and yet he knew that if there was danger of anything like a tornado, it would certainly be proper.

Even while he hesitated great splashing drops of rain began to fall. The wind took on a new and discordant howl. A dull roar like breaking surf came from the distance.

Van Gay waited no longer.

He rushed into the pilot-house and pressed the alarm button as he had been directed by Frank.

Instantly the great alarm gong pealed forth. Out from their bunks came the excited voyagers.

Frank was the first to reach the deck. He knew in an instant what the danger was and just how great it was.

"What's wrong, Van Gay?" he called, fancying there might be something else.

"A storm," replied Van Gay. "Don't you hear it coming? From the racket I should say it was a tornado."

"Which it is without doubt," cried the young inventor excitedly; "give way at the anchor rope, Barney and Pomp! We will have the rotascopes blown out of us if we don't!"

"Aye, aye, sor!" cried the Celt, and he and Pomp gave way at the rope. But before they could get the grapple aboard the crash came.

There was a bellowing like the mad bursting of waves upon a rock bound shore, and the air ship gave a tremendous bound forward.

The anchor rope parted and up she shot like a rocket. What followed was very confusing to the aerial navigators.

CHAPTER VII.

OVER THE ANDES.

Up went the air ship like a feather and round and round it whirled as if impelled by giant hands. The rudder was of little account.

The rotascopes and propeller seemed also to have lost their power of control and the air ship was in a bad plight. She seemed wholly at the mercy of the storm.

With its bursting all had fled to the cabin.

Frank Reade, Jr., clung to the key board, though the night was so black that he could not see whither they were being carried.

His one plan was to elevate the air ship above the storm cloud and in higher altitude ride it out safely. But the rotascopes seemed unable to elevate the Sprite an inch.

On and on in the frightful blackness and chaos they were whirled. It was an awful experience.

Should the rigging of the Sprite hold out all might yet be well. All depended on this chance.

It seemed at every moment though, as if it must succumb. The strain was something dreadful.

What seemed like an interminable length of time elapsed. Then suddenly there came a brief lull. With a thrill Frank felt the air ship rising.

He put all speed on the rotascopes and up she shot.

In a very few moments she rode in calm atmosphere, and Frank knew that the danger was over. The storm howled itself out far below.

But it was long after daylight ere it ceased.

Then Frank allowed the air ship to descend until the country below could be plainly seen. It was a revelation.

They had plainly been blown on a southward course, for the sea was no longer in view. All about them were high mountain peaks, mighty defiles and valleys choked with great mass of luxuriant tropical vegetation.

They were in the Andes beyond all manner of doubt. How far they had been carried by the storm, remained to be yet estimated.

But that it was more than one hundred miles Frank felt certain.

He believed that they had struck upon the most northern spur of the Colombian Andes. Of course a great distance yet lay before them.

But Van Gay was interested in the scene even now. He could hardly contain himself.

All that day they sailed over as wild and wonderful a mountain region as the human eye ever rested upon. Frank was interested, Van Gay was delighted, and Barney and Pomp wonderstruck.

Thus far on the voyage these two practical jokers had maintained a quiet demeanor. Now, however, their style changed. Animal spirits long repressed would break forth.

Barney had long had it in for Pomp on account of a little game the latter had played on him before leaving home.

He believed the leisure and the opportunity was at hand to square accounts, and he at once made plans to do so. Pomp, of course, was all unsuspecting.

Barney laid his wires carefully.

That night, at a safe hour, he lashed the rudder of the air ship, and went into the pilot-house. When he came out he carried a handkerchief, a small bottle, and a keen razor, with some water and scap.

He crept like a shadow down to the door of Pomp's stateroom. The coon was sleeping soundly in his berth.

Barney listened a long while to make sure the coast was clear. Then he crept silently into the room.

It was easy work to place the handkerchief saturated with chloroform to Pomp's nose. In a few moments the coon's sleep was a deep one.

The Celt chuckled.

"Bejabbers!" he muttered, "I'll make a fool av him this toime fer shure!"

Out came the razor, some soap and the water. Barney mixed a good lather.

Then he quickly proceeded to shave slick and clean a round spot about two inches in diameter on the very crown of Pomp's head. He made the spot smooth and shiny.

This was all.

He put away the razor and soap, and removed the handkerchief from Pomp's nose. Then he crept out of the stateroom.

He waited awhile outside until he heard the coon draw a deep breath and turn over. Then he went jubilantly back to the deck.

An hour later Pomp came blinking on deck to relieve the Celt.

"Massy Lordy!" muttered the coon. "I was neber so sleepy in mah life. I neber slept any sounder, I'ish. Mebbe it am dis southern climate."

"No doubt av that," said Barney, quite seriously; "don't yez fail to kape awak now, yez omadhoun!"

"Huh! don't yo' be afraid, I'ish!" retorted the coon.

Barney knew this was enough. The coon would keep awake and all traces of the drug would pass away before daylight.

And then!

The Celt climbed chuckling into his berth. He looked forward to a bit of fun.

The next day the air ship rode high over a great pass in the Andes. They were now in Ecuador, and far below was seen a mountain trail leading down to a town below.

Across an immensely deep chasm there was a bridge of rope, and some llamas with their driver were crossing on it.

The scene was an interesting one, and Van Gay and Frank watched it for some while.

Truly, this was a wonderful part of the world. These mighty mountain crags, the awful chasms, the wild vegetation, could be equaled nowhere else.

"Pon honor," exclaimed Van Gay, "this is worth traveling round the world to see. You will admit, Frank, that it is grand?"

"Certainly!" agreed the young inventor.

"But wait until we get down into Peru!" declared Van Gay; "the Cloud City will open your eyes. Ah, it seems as if we would never get there."

And thus the air ship drifted on over the great scene spread below. Every hour they were now nearing the boundary line of Peru.

A little past the noon hour Frank came out on deck and said:

"We have just crossed the Equator. We shall soon be in the Peruvian Andes."

This delighted Van Gay. At once he began studying the distant horizon with his glass.

Meanwhile Barney had been very busy in the pilot-house.

Pomp was engaged in the cooking galley, preparing the noonday meal.

It was served a little later, and as Frank and Van Gay sat at the table while Pomp served them, for the first time Barney's practical joke began to take effect.

Van Gay was the first to note the bald spot on Pomp's black poll. At first he thought his eyesight was deceiving him.

Then he cried:

"Why, hello! I didn't know that you were at all bald, Pomp! What does it mean?"

The coon turned in surprise.

"Wha' dat, sah?" he exclaimed. "I don' undahstan' yo', sah. I ain' a bit bald, sah. Mah wool neber come out yet, sah."

"Well, I'll take my oath you are mistaken," declared Van Gay; "just you feel back of your bump of precocity there and see. If the wool is not missing there I'll treat. What do you say, Frank?"

The young inventor stared.

"On my word it is the truth," he declared.

This somewhat startled Pomp. At once he proceeded to investigate. He put a hand to the top of his head, and—

Horrors! his wool, such as was left, fairly rose on end. The expression on his face was comical.

"Fo' de lan's sakes!" he gasped. "I neber felt dat afo'. When eber did I lose all dat fom mah head. Dar must be saffin' wrong. I cud sw'ar dat it was dar yesterday."

Frank and Van Gay laughed at the coon's seriousness. But the latter said reassuringly:

"Oh, don't mind that, Pomp. Lots of our great men are bald. Maybe it will grow out again!"

But the coon went quickly below. He was in a state of intense excitement.

It was a shock to him to discover that he had been growing bald and did not know it. He was a comparatively young man, and to lose so much of his woolly headgear, disturbed him.

He felt assiduously of the bald spot. Then he got two mirrors and took a look at it.

"Yes, there was no denying the fact. There was quite an extensive bald spot on his cranium. It seemed to him to add age to his appearance.

The coon sat down and tried to think.

"Dat am de mos' curus fing I eber heerd tell ob," he muttered in a mystified way. "Dat cudn't hab happened in one night; an' yet I neber felt or seen it dere befo'."

At this moment Barney went whistling through the cabin. At once Pomp called to him.

"Phwat is it, naygur?" asked Barney, appearing in the doorway of the stateroom.

"I wan' fo' to ax yo' a question," said Pomp, earnestly.

Barney was as serious as a parson.

"All roight," he said.

"Will yo' jes' tell me if yo' eber seen dat bald spot on mah haid befo'?"

Barney bent over and scrutinized the spot. He had to summon all his nerve power to keep from bursting out into spasms of laughter.

But he managed to say carelessly:

"Why, yes, naygur, I've seen that afore. Shure that's old to me. Didn't yez know it yersilf?"

Pomp gave a gasp.

"Neber!" he replied. "Massy, Lordy, I hope de res' ob mah hair won't come out dat way. I done wish yo' had tole me ob it, I'ish."

"Begorra, yez moight have felt offinded," replied Barney, with an effort at self control.

"Yo' know bettah dan dat. Wha' am I gwine to do? Ain' got no use at all fo' a bald headed niggah!" wailed Pomp.

Barney was certainly getting square with his confrere in a rich manner. But he was not yet through with him.

"Phwat will yez pay me if I make that wool grow out wanst more?" he asked.

"I'll gib yo' de bes' bottle ob Scotch whisky dat I hab got in mah commissary chest, sah," declared Pomp; "hab yo' got anyfing dat will make dat ha'r to grow out, honey?"

"Bejabers, yez kin bet that I have!" cried Barney. "Wait here and I'll bring it to yez."

And away went the Celt. When he reached his own room he went into paroxysms of laughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CLOUD CITY.

BARNEY's joke had worked well. But poor Pomp had not yet seen the last of it.

In a short while the Celt returned. He carried some strange-looking black mixture in a saucer. Also some strips of lint and linen.

"Now," he said, seriously, "this foine hair producer was furst used in Oireland by the O'Sheas, and they were Irish kings, an' the saycret has descended to meself as a family inheritance. Av coarse, it's very valooable, an' av yez warn't a frind av moine I'd niver let yez have it."

"Yo' kin be suah dat I appreciate de favor!" declared Pomp.

"Yez kin be dead shure av gittin' yer hair all back agin if yez will follow my directions," continued Barney. "All that yez need to do is to kape this poultice on the bald spot fer twenty-four hours. It may give yez a bit av shmartin', but it will dhraw the hairs out agin jist as a hot sun dhraws wather from the say. Now, are yez riddy?"

Barney daubed some of the black mixture upon the lint and applied it to the bald spot. Then after a liberal application he bound it up with the linen.

"Now yez must not take this off fer twenty-four hours," he declared solemnly. "Yez hair will grow ivery day after that."

"Lor' bress yo', chile," said Pomp, gratefully. "I'se jes' gwine fo' to do jes' wha' yo' tells me to."

A short while later, Barney, from his position in the pilot house, could hear Pomp grunting and swearing in a most profuse manner. But the bandage was not removed.

Frank saw that Pomp had his head tied up and laughed uproariously when he heard the reason therefor.

"Well, I hope your remedy will succeed, Pomp," he cried. "I never heard of one like it, though."

But the ducky was faithful to the Celt's remedy. He kept the poultice on loyally for twenty-four hours. Then, when he removed it, the nicest kind of a blister filled the place of the bald spot.

"Whin that goes down," said Barney seriously, "yez will foind that the little foine hairs will be comin' out."

But it was several days before the blister vanished. Then after the sore scalp had healed, as Barney had predicted, and as would have been the case anyway, the wool began to rapidly crop out.

This was all nuts for the Celt. He had never had so much secret fun before in his life.

He had thoroughly deceived the coon, who believed him his greatest benefactor. But he suspected that Frank and Van Gay had tumbled to his game, though they held their peace.

Which was lucky for Barney.

Meanwhile, the Air Sprite had drifted down into Peru. Van Gay declared that they were not fifty miles from the high peaks among which lay the walls of the Cloud City.

Naturally the voyagers were all eager and excited.

They recalled the strange fate of the two aeronauts, Stearns and Bent, and wondered if they should be able to solve the mystery.

Van Gay believed that they would, and that it was not impossible that they were yet alive, and might be rescued.

Frank was skeptical.

"Those mountain people, like the Incas, were crude and ignorant, and bound by savage laws and religion. They would probably put the prisoners to death."

However this was, the voyagers all kept an eager watch for the Cloud City. But they sailed through dense clouds which seemed to envelop the peaks.

For two days the air ship cruised about among this eternal wall of mist, and then it lifted for a brief while.

That was sufficient.

The Cloud City was instantly revealed to the astonished gaze of the voyagers. They were spell-bound.

It far exceeded even the enthusiastic description of Van Gay. High crowning the mountain wall of pink colored rock it made a beautiful spectacle.

It might have been a feudal city of ancient times, so far as its general aspect went. Far away through the high valley of the Andes stretched this region of the clouds.

It seemed strange that vegetation should exist and the land appear so fertile at this fearful altitude.

It was an absolute contradiction of the teachings and the experience of the scientist.

But Van Gay had already theorized that there were certain climatic differences here existing, created by the almost constant presence of the clouds, which gave to this aerial world a climate of its own.

The air was not so dry and arid as one might expect on mountain peaks.

The Air Sprite hung directly over the Cloud City.

The scene revealed was a most remarkable one. To describe it in detail would seem almost impossible.

The city did not seem to have streets as most cities do, but the buildings were connected with the little arched bridges. The people lived practically on the housetops, and descended into their houses instead of entering from below.

This made of the buildings a strange and unique spectacle. The housetops were, without exception, literal roof gardens, after the manner of the Damascus of ancient history.

Everywhere were great throngs of very strange looking people, men, women and children. They were gazing at the Air Sprite with apparent wonder.

And yet there seemed to be no fear or consternation. Giant framed people they were.

Van Gay and Frank studied them with a glass, and finally the latter asked:

"What do you make of them?"

"They are not of the Red Indian race," declared Van Gay, positively; "their peculiar yellowish skin and fair hair precludes that. Neither are they of the Incas race. By Jove, we have discovered a new and distinct race of people!"

Frank was of this opinion himself and not disposed to make denial. But he again asked:

"What is the next move, Van Gay?"

The explorer was silent a moment.

"Well," he said finally, "we did not come here for conquest."

"No."

"Perhaps we can make some overtures of peace with them."

"Very well. Have you any method to suggest?" asked Frank.

Van Gay stroked his mustache.

"Perhaps a bold method is the best," he declared. "We ought, with our equipment for defense, to little fear an attack. Why not descend and meet them?"

"Correct!" agreed Frank; "it is a good plan!"

So he turned and signaled Barney.

"Let the air ship descend," he cried; "drop her on that green knoll just under us!"

"All roight, sor!"

Down settled the Air Sprite slowly until she was within a hundred yards of terra firma. All this while the mountain people watched the descent with wonderment.

There were none of them on the knoll where Frank proposed to alight. In fact, none were nearer than fully a quarter of a mile.

But it could be seen that the alarm had spread to the gates of the city. A great throng were pressing out and a loud shouting was heard.

"They are aroused," cried Van Gay; "it is well to be a little prepared, Frank."

"All right!" agreed the young inventor; "bring up the rifles, Barney and Pomp!"

Frank went to the key-board while the two jokers proceeded to carry out this order. When they came up with the weapons Frank had brought the air ship down upon the knoll.

It was a commanding position, and the voyagers felt that it would be difficult for a foe to carry it. But there was a mighty throng coming out of the city.

And from the small stone huts and underground dwellings all over the plain the mountain people were coming.

"Whew!" cried Van Gay, "what a throng there are!"

"Bejabbers, there's thousands av them!" declared Barney.

He danced up to the rail and drew a bead on them with his rifle. Pomp did the same.

"Begorra, here's a wager I kill the fust wan av the omadhauns!" cried Barney.

"I'll go yo' on dat, P'ish!"

But Frank shouted:

"Hold on there! That won't do! You must not fire until we become satisfied of their intentions to attack us!"

"Which is right," declared Van Gay. "There can be no doubt but that they are hostile, though."

"Well, I think so myself," agreed Frank; "but let us not be the first to strike a blow."

So the voyagers held fire until the foe were right at the foot of the knoll.

Then a good view of them could be had.

In all their travels our adventurers had never seen men of such wonderful physique and strong faces. They were clad partly in goatskin and a curious kind of flaxen material. Long yellow hair fell down from their shoulders.

Their weapons were javelins, tipped with bone and flint, huge clubs of wood and darts with keen tips—not very formidable when compared with the white man's deadly rifle.

But yet, on even ground, these giants would make a tremendous battle, no doubt.

They were not to be despised.

They swarmed at the foot of the knoll like veritable bees. There were fully a thousand of them.

That they meant to attack the air ship there was no doubt. With fierce cries and brandishing their weapons, they came quickly on up the slope.

Frank saw that there were but two things to do. One was to raise the air ship to a point of safety, and the other was to give the foe an impression most forcible of the superiority of the invaders.

If Frank should retreat now he saw that it would simply add to the confidence of the enemy, and put further away any possibility of a chance at amicable understanding.

He was much averse to the taking of human life.

But he was convinced that his best and only plan was to stand his ground. And he did so.

On came the foe.

The aerial travelers had retreated to the cabin. Here they were ready for action. Frank waited patiently.

Then, when he saw that nothing else could be done, he cried:

"Open fire! Take the foremost!"

At once the four rifles spoke and a volume of flame leaped from the port holes in the cabin side. As many huge mountain natives threw up their arms and fell.

There was a swaying and hesitation in the attacking line. The mountain people were evidently astonished by this strange and unheard of repulse.

CHAPTER IX.

FIGHTING ON THE HOUSE-TOPS.

THE flash of fire and smoke, the deafening report and the sudden dropping in a mysterious manner of four of their number, brought them to a mystified halt. The mountain people had evidently never seen or heard firearms before.

"Once again!" cried Frank, "take them while confused!"

Again the rifles spoke.

The mountain people fell back. Consternation took the place of bravado. Here was a strange foe, and their superstitious fears asserted themselves.

They retreated in a disorderly fashion some distance from the knoll. The air was filled with their startled cries, and they ran about like sheep.

"Whurroo!" shouted Barney, "shure it's a foine batin' we gave them!"

"Not much to boast of," declared Frank. "I always feel guilty to shoot such poor wretches, but really, it was our only way to bring them to terms."

"Indeed it was!" agreed Van Gay. "Perhaps they will treat with us now."

Frank stepped out on the forward deck with a white flag.

He did not know that they would understand what this meant. But he could think of no other or better signal.

He waved the flag and made all sorts of amicable gestures. But the mountain people would pay no heed.

They remained in a huddle out upon the level ground. They did not return to the attack, but seemed to be holding some sort of a council.

Frank came back into the cabin.

"No use," he said. "We cannot compromise with them."

"What shall we do then, to learn the fate of Stearns and Bent?"

Frank was thoughtful. Finally he said:

"We must search for them. First let us drive these rascals out of their city. Then we can search it thoroughly, and if the two aeronauts are alive we shall find them."

"Good!" cried Van Gay; "we could devise no better plan."

"We will start at once!"

"Yes!"

Frank at once raised the air ship and allowed it to sweep over the heads of the startled mountain natives. Many of them fell upon their faces.

Straight for the city the Sprite sailed.

This was now nearly deserted. But seeing the apparent purpose of the visitors, the mountain people set forth at full speed to return to the defense of the city.

But the Air Sprite of course reached it long before them. Frank selected the broadest and highest roof and allowed the air ship to settle down upon it.

Then he cried:

"Lively all! We shall not have any too much time in which to carry out our plans."

"You are right!" cried Van Gay.

"Pomp, you may remain on board the air ship and keep a good outlook. Don't let them surprise you!" said Frank.

The darky bowed and scraped.

"A'right, Marse Frank. Don' yo' be 'fraid ob dat!"

Frank and Van Gay, with Barney now leaped down upon the stone roof of the building.

They were armed to the teeth.

Frank led the way to a broad stairway which led down into the dwelling. Not one of the natives could be seen.

The room below was dark and bare. A few piles of goat skins were scattered about, which probably served as sleeping couches.

Below this room were others. There were but small apertures for windows, and no door or outlet save that by which they had entered.

From room to room our explorers went with no further discovery. Not a native was to be found.

The house was deserted.

As nothing was to be gained by further search here, the explorers returned to the roof. And here they met with what came near proving a fatality.

On an adjoining roof several of the mountain people who had remained in the city were gathered.

As our adventurers now appeared they sent a shower of javelins across and into their midst.

One of them grazed Barney's shoulder. A few inches nearer and it would have proved fatal.

The others went wide, but this was enough for Frank, who shouted:

"Down, everybody! Give it to them!"

A small parapet ran around the roof. Behind this the explorers sank flat. Then they opened fire.

In less time than it takes to tell it the roof was cleared. But by this time there was a great uproar at the city gate.

A mighty throng came swarming over the walls.

It was evident that they were desperate and meant to drive out the invaders at any cost. Swinging their weapons they came rushing across the housetops.

"Begorra!" cried Barney, "shure they are afther us! Phwat shall we do?"

"We will hardly be able to withstand such a mob," said Van Gay.

"You are right," agreed Frank. "We must get back to the air ship at once."

They turned with this purpose in mind, when a startled cry came from Pomp. The coon had rushed to the air ship's rail.

"Wud yez luk over there, Misther Frank!" cried Barney, who had caught the meaning of Pomp's alarm. The coon was pointing across the roofs.

Frank and Van Gay looked in the direction indicated. Their gaze encountered a startling spectacle.

A number of human forms were engaged in a deadly wrestle at the very verge of one of the housetops. Six mountain natives were endeavoring to overwhelm two men, whom all in the exploring party now saw were white men.

"Jericho!" screamed Van Gay; "they are the lost aeronauts!"

"Bejabers, they're white men!" cried Barney. "Shure we ought to help thim!"

"And help them we will!" shouted Frank. "Forward—all!"

At this moment one of the white prisoners broke away from his captors.

With a wild cry, he set out across the roofs.

But he did not go far.

The mountain natives were upon him like wolves, and he was borne down, helpless.

Before our adventurers could reach the spot he was dragged down with his companion into one of the buildings and out of sight. Our adventurers had no idea of abandoning the pursuit.

On they went at full speed. But when they reached the spot not a sign of the wretches could be seen.

But there were stains of blood at one of the stairways. Down this the rescuers now rushed.

Down they went and into a huge room below. Here was a huge bowl of stone with a great round bowlder in it. The bowlder was provided with long arms of wood driven deep into it. In the bowl was a heap of yellow maize.

It was a rude mill for grinding grains, and was operated by turning the bowlder about in the bowl. No doubt the two white captives, like slaves, had been forced to do this.

Through the mill chamber the would-be rescuers rushed. Another stairway was seen and down this they sprang.

This brought them to the ground floor of the building. But the big chamber was deserted.

Not a human being was in sight.

Nor was there any visible outlet to the place other than the one by which they had entered.

"Fooled!" cried Van Gay. "We are off the track."

"No," said Frank positively; "they certainly came down here."

"Begorra, I think so," agreed Barney.

Van Gay was impatient.

"Well," he exclaimed, "they are not here now!"

"I am not so sure of that."

"What?"

"There must be some trick about it all. I mean to find it out."

"I'm with you!" cried Van Gay, "if there's any chance. But I think they gave us the slip up-stairs."

"How could that be?"

"Easy enough. Perhaps we did not get the right stairway."

But Frank was obdurate. He felt positive that the party had come down into this chamber.

So he fell to examining the walls and the floor. Van Gay and Barney joined him.

The result was that in a few moments Frank gave a shout:

"Look here!" he cried.

One of the great blocks of stone appeared not to be encased in mortar as were the others. A distinct open crack was all about it.

Frank pushed on it and it moved. Again he pushed and it swung back. It was on a pivot and revealed a huge, dark aperture.

Van Gay gave a shout and was about to run into the place when Frank restrained him.

"Wait!" he said.

"What is the matter?"

"We can go no further now!"

Van Gay was amazed.

"Why?" he asked.

"Listen!"

And then to the hearing of all came plainly a startling sound. It was the distant muffled rattle of a repeating rifle.

The explorers looked at each other.

"Pomp is having a lively time!" cried Van Gay; "if they pen us in here we are lost!"

This was seen to be true. Of course it was a great disappointment to have to abandon the quest here and now. But it was necessary.

Back they rushed for the housetop. They could hear a great din and Frank was in great fear that the foe had got aboard the air ship. It seemed hardly reasonable that one man could hold so many hundreds at bay for any great length of time.

All realized the necessity, therefore, of at once reaching Pomp's side. Up the stairs they dashed.

But suddenly a startling thing occurred.

There was a terrific explosion and every man was hurled from his feet, and thrown violently down the stairs.

Daylight yawned before them, and they saw that a great gap had been made in the adobe wall of the building.

What had happened?

Van Gay was the first to recover. He shouted:

"An earthquake!"

And for the moment this was accepted as the logical and possible explanation of the matter. But a new dilemma now presented itself.

The stairway had also tumbled with the wall.

How were they to reach the roof above? It did not seem easy by any manner of means.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE CLIFF WALL.

It was certainly not the most cheering of situations. The three explorers looked at each other.

"Trapped!" declared Van Gay.

"It looks like it!" agreed Frank. "I hope no harm has come to the air ship."

"Bejabers, the yaller divils are coming afther us, in spite av all," cried Barney. "Wud yez luk at that?"

The Celt was right.

Up through the breach in the wall came a swarm of the foe. It was a thrilling moment.

A more savage, blood-thirsty mob could hardly be conceived. They had caught sight of our adventurers and meant to have their lives.

Up they came like wolves. There was no time to lose.

"Give it to them!" cried Frank, "don't give them a chance."

At once fire was opened. It was a deadly range too.

But the mountain natives had seemed to have recovered from their fear of the rifles. They did not falter in their attack.

On they came savagely. A moment later and several of them had gained a foothold in the chamber.

Then a startling thing occurred.

There was a blinding flash, a fearful roar, and an earthquake-like shock. The attacking band melted away like chaff. Blood and heaps of dead bodies were everywhere.

While our adventurers were again stunned by the shock. But this time they guessed the truth.

"Be jabers!" yelled Barney, "that's the worruk av the naygur!"

"It is Pomp!" cried Frank; "he has saved us!"

"Pomp?" exclaimed Van Gay; "what the deuce has he been doing?"

"He has thrown a couple of bombs among the foe."

"Dynamite?"

"Yes!"

"Jericho!" gasped Van Gay; "that is all right, but I would just as soon he wouldn't risk it again. I thought I was blown up myself."

Everybody laughed at this. But there was no time for joking. It was necessary to act quickly.

So all made a rush for the breach in the wall.

And as they sprang out into the open air they saw Pomp at the air ship's rail, not two hundred feet in the air. The darkey had raised the air ship providently and repelled the foe decisively.

"Heigho, Pomp!" shouted Van Gay. "Don't drop any more bombs just yet!"

A cry of joy came down from the air ship's rail. The coon saw his friends and was overjoyed that they were safe.

Down swept the air ship gracefully.

A moment later all were again safely on board. Certainly the experiences of the day had been sufficiently thrilling. All were much exhausted.

The day was near its close. It was likely that the mountain natives had carried their prisoners into some deep dungeon where it would be hard to reach them.

As little could be accomplished in the night, it was decided to wait until the next day before resuming operations.

So the air ship drifted out over the mountain peak and rested at anchor with the great valley far beneath. Then our voyagers prepared for necessary recuperation.

Pomp prepared a fine meal, and all were much refreshed thereafter. Darkness settled down most intense.

But the search light's rays kept constantly playing upon the northern wall of the Cloud City, where it hung over the steep descent of fully a thousand feet.

And as Barney allowed the brilliant rays to roam along this mighty expanse of rock he gave a sudden start.

Did he see aright?

Far below the city wall he saw what seemed to be several small crevices in the face of the cliff. And what was more, they did not look like those usually made by nature.

They were too exact in outline, too much after the pattern of the ariel window seen in old time castles.

The Celt studied them a few moments.

Then he cried:

"Misther Frank, wud yez cum here, sor."

Frank was on the after deck with Van Gay. They were smoking.

"What is it, Barney?" he asked.

"Shure, sor, a bit av a diskivery."

"A discovery?"

"Yis, sor."

At once both Frank and Van Gay started for the pilot house. They were interested.

It did not take Barney long to point out his discovery. And Frank and Van Gay shared his opinion that it was the work of human hands.

"That means much," declared Frank. "We have now a better idea of the resources of these people."

"Right," agreed Van Gay. "No doubt the entire cliff is honey-combed."

"In that case our prisoners are somewhere down in those underground chambers."

"Yes."

The three studied the situation for some time. Then Barney said: "Shure, sor, phwat will yez be afther doing about it?"

"Nothing to-night," replied Frank; "to-morrow we will see what can be done. Heigho! what is that?"

The young inventor sprang up with a sharp cry. He pointed with a thrill at one of the windows in the cliff.

The sight which all beheld was an astounding one.

For a moment it held them spellbound. They knew not how to act.

For suddenly through one of the crevices there had crept forth a human form. It hung a moment on the verge and then a rope some hundred feet in length went tumbling down.

Down this the unknown slid. At its end was a small shelf of rock and here he rested.

But what a position was his.

He could certainly go downward no further unless to his death. It was only one-tenth of the distance from the bottom of the abyss.

But yet he hung there looking downward, as if meditating a leap. But one conclusion was reached by the aerial voyagers.

He was one of the two imprisoned aeronauts. Certainly this was true. Their duty was plain.

He must be rescued.

Frank sprang to the key-board. At the same moment Barney loosened the anchor rope.

Frank lowered the air ship quickly, and bore over toward the face of the cliff.

Van Gay shouted:

"Have courage, my man! We are coming to help you!"

The imprisoned man turned his gaze upward and made a joyful gesture with one arm.

The air ship slid nearer.

It was a critical moment for all.

The chances were by no means of the best for getting the poor fellow safely off his dangerous perch.

Near a thousand feet of abyss was at his feet. He was weak, and do doubt nervous. There was no certainty but that he might fall at any moment from sheer exhaustion.

There was the necessity for extreme haste. Frank realized this.

Nearer swept the air ship. Barney and Pomp and Van Gay were at the rail, ready to give an assisting hand to the unfortunate man.

They were within a dozen feet of him. They could see his haggard, wan face light up with intense joy, when a wild, awful cry went up from Barney's lips.

"Back, Mither Frank, back," he shrieked; "howly murder, it's the ind av us!"

There was a terrible reason for Barney's danger call. Far above he had heard a babel of voices.

Looking up he saw a light on the verge of the city wall. A great throng of the mountain natives were there congregated.

They were just in the act of rolling a mighty boulder over the verge. If it should strike the air ship fairly, its fate would be sealed.

Instinctively everybody looked upward. Then Frank reversed the propeller.

The air ship shot backward, but all too late. Down came the mighty boulder.

It struck the air ship a glancing blow just abaft the pilot house. Frank was hurled to the deck. Had it hit the air ship fairly, it would have been demolished.

But as it was, it threw the electric machinery out of gear, and the Air Sprite began to settle to the bottom of the gorge, gradually sliding away in a lateral direction from the cliff.

The unfortunate prisoner was left yet upon the shelf of rock. What became of him could not be seen, as every electric light was extinguished.

Down slid the Sprite. She finally rested with a slight shock upon a green and mossy bank of a brawling stream.

Other boulders came plunging down, but they did not strike the air ship as she was out of their range.

The discomfiture of our voyagers can hardly be expressed in words.

"By Jove! it is too bad that we couldn't have got that poor fellow aboard first," declared Frank.

"Indeed it was!" agreed Van Gay. "We can do nothing for him now."

"Not until the machinery is repaired."

"Is it badly damaged?"

"I think not."

Frank went below to examine the injuries to the Sprite. In a few moments he had the electric lights in operation.

The first move was to throw their glare upward against the cliff. A great shock was accorded all.

The shelf of rock was bare. Its occupant was no longer there.

It seemed that there could be but one explanation of his disappearance. He had gone down to his death, a sure release from his slavery

There was a possibility of course that he had gone back to his prison chamber. But none believed this.

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Van Gay, "it is too bad. I wish we had seen that boulder in time."

"Well," said Frank, grimly, "we can at least avenge his death."

"Good!" cried Van Gay, "give them a terrible lesson, Frank."

"I mean to."

Frank went at once to work upon the machinery. But it was a long task, and daylight had come ere it was completed.

Then all could look up and see plainly the narrow windows in the cliff. The rope yet hung from the crevice.

The brawling stream was just beneath that shelf of rock. No doubt the unfortunate man's body had been carried down its current into valleys far below. For all agreed that he was dead.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESCUE.

NOTHING could be seen of the mountain natives upon the city walls far above. All was silence.

Where they had gone or what they were up to was a question. But the great problem which now confronted our voyagers was what it was best to do.

Frank was a little shy of risking another trip under the verge of the cliff. Doubtless other boulders were in waiting above.

But he was soon decided.

He pressed the rotascope lever and sent the air ship upward. Up she went out of the gorge.

Above the city walls a lively scene was brought to view. There were the mountain people hiding in hundreds behind the parapet.

A long line of boulders was all in readiness. Up shot the air ship above it all.

A terrific din was made by the barbarians. They hurled their weapons at the air ship and made all manner of angry demonstrations.

"We will drive them out of there pretty quick!" declared Frank.

He held the air ship directly over the line of boulders. Then he took a handful of small bombs and went to the rail.

He hurled one with great exactness downward.

It struck fairly on the verge of the parapet. It is not easy to describe the fearful result.

A great section of the wall and the boulders went crashing down into the gorge.

Some of the natives went with it.

The others fled for their lives. In a very short time the vicinity was quite deserted.

The natives had fled for their lives into the remaining houses. There was no doubt but that they had gone into the lower depths of their cliff abode, far beneath the Cloud City.

They had vanished as by magic. Not one of them was now in sight.

The Cloud City was as deserted and lonely as if it had no inhabitants.

"They have got the best of us just now!" cried Van Gay. "How will you root them out, Frank?"

"We will see!" replied the young inventor, coolly; "there will be a way open for us."

The Sprite sailed around the city once and Frank carefully studied the situation. Then he decided upon a plan of action.

He knew that it was necessary to invade the cliff stronghold of the natives if he hoped to rescue the two prisoners. This certainly seemed no easy matter.

To venture single-handed into the place would be suicidal. But Frank reflected that if the cliff wall could be shattered, perhaps the place could be made untenable for the foe, with the use of the repeating rifles.

So he decided to try the effect of the dynamite bombs. He procured a number of them and selected the most salient point for operation.

A section of the cliff had already been shattered.

Frank reflected sagely that if more of it could be demolished perhaps a way could be opened into the cliff chambers. There was some risk in the undertaking.

There was the chance that harm might be done the prisoners as well as the natives. But Frank could see nothing better than this *dernier resort*.

So he caused the Sprite to hang directly over the vulnerable spot. Then he began operations.

Bomb after bomb was dropped on the cliff, and great fragments were shattered and cleft from it. Gradually a huge cavity was opened.

And chamber after chamber became thus revealed, until finally there was a great shock, and the entire upper face of the cliff fell.

A mighty cavern chamber was thus revealed, fully one hundred feet below the cliff verge. But not a sign of the natives could be seen.

Doubtless, however, they had penetrated to deeper chambers beyond. Frank saw now that he must change his plans.

He could not hope to blow away the whole mountain peak. This would require a year's time.

There was no telling how deep the cavern passages were.

For aught he knew they might extend under the entire mountain. So Frank desisted in his present course.

"What are you going to do?" asked Van Gay, "give it up?"

"Not by any means," replied the young inventor. "I have another plan."

"What is it?"

"Well, you see we have now a foothold on this cliff."

"Yes."

"I propose to rest the air ship here while three of us penetrate the passages beyond."

Van Gay looked dubious.

"Is it the only move we can make?" he asked.

"It looks like it at present. We can keep a sharp lookout and if danger confronts us we can return."

"Very well," agreed Van Gay, "I am with you. Whatever you say goes."

"An' I'm wid yez too," cried Barney; "shure we moight as well thry an' do something."

So the Sprite rested on a convenient part of the cliff and preparations were made for invading the cliff stronghold. It was no light undertaking.

But Barney and Frank and Van Gay were soon ready. They were armed to the teeth as they leaped over the rail.

A moment later they entered one of the passages. It was dark and a trifle damp. But the explorers went boldly forward.

They had not gone far when the passage began to descend. Then it widened until Frank exclaimed:

"Listen!"

All came to a halt and listened. Plainly to their ears came a comprehensive sound.

It was the distant rush of waters over a stony bed.

"An underground stream!" exclaimed Van Gay. "Who would have looked for such a thing?"

"That then explains the outlet of the Andean lake," declared Frank.

The lake which he mentioned occupied the center of the valley among the peaks. Several streams ran into it, but there had seemed to be no outlet.

This, however, seemed now to be explained in the underground stream. Our adventurers pushed on.

Nearer drew the sounds of the roaring torrent. It was not long before they came to it.

Light was admitted through crevices in the rocky roof above. It was seen that the stream was a powerful one.

It dashed on down through the underground cavern, and a dull roar some distance below indicated that there was a sizable cataract there.

It was easy to understand that this underground stream, burst finally out into a deep and wide gorge somewhere down hew in the Andean region. There were many such streams in the great range of mountains.

Along the banks of the stream the explorers proceeded until they came to the verge of the cataract.

Then they paused.

There was no possibility of going further. There was a sheer descent of many hundred feet to the bottom of the cataract.

"Whew!" exclaimed Van Gay, "if a man should go over there his fate would be sealed."

"You are right," agreed Frank, "it proves well enough that our foes never went further in this direction. We might as well go back!"

So they turned back until they reached the passage by which they had entered the place. Their further progress seemed to be barred by the stream.

It looked too swift and dangerous for a safe fording. That the mountain natives had crossed it was by no means certain.

For the moment our explorers were stuck. They could not decide what move it was best to make.

But at the last moment, and when it was half decided to turn back, an unexpected thing happened.

There came from the distance up the stream, a sudden, strange and weird sound. It seemed to resemble nothing so much as the wail of a lost spirit.

"What was that?" exclaimed Van Gay, in amazement. "Did you hear it?"

"Begorra, it was a banshee!" averred Barney in trepidation.

"Hush!" exclaimed Frank, "there it is again. A human voice!"

The explorers looked at each other in amazement. They waited and listened. Again the voice sounded, and this time nearer.

In fact, it drew nearer every moment, until its tones were plainly to be heard.

"Help! Help! Oh, God, give me help!"

It was unmistakably English, and gave our explorers a great thrill. They knew that some person of their own nationality was in trouble.

"Come on!" cried Frank. "We must go to his help, whoever he is."

Forward the three explorers sprang.

But they had not gone a dozen yards when an explanation of the mystery was afforded them.

Into view from the darkness of the passage above there sprang a human form. He was in a staggering run, with white face and gasping for breath.

It was one of the imprisoned aeronauts.

At sight of our friends he gave a choking cry and increased his gait.

Behind there was the roar of human voices above the sound of the cataract.

"He has escaped!" cried Van Gay, "and they are in pursuit of him. We must help him!"

As the escaped prisoner came up, he cried:

"Thank God! I have at last reached you. Defend me, I beg of you. Oh, help me from this accursed place!"

"That we will!" cried Frank; "have no fear. Take that passage behind us and go on until you come to the air ship. Go aboard and wait for us. We will hold these devils at bay!"

No further explanation was made. The escaped prisoner staggered on in compliance with the command.

Then our adventurers faced the coming foe. They raised their rifles and opened fire.

Crack—crack—ack!

A volley of bullets met the barbarians, and no doubt was a stunning surprise to them.

In spite of their numbers they hesitated, and with another volley cutting them to pieces fell back. Thus far our friends had the best of it.

"If we can only hold them at bay a few moments longer," cried Frank. "We shall be all right."

"Give it to them!" cried Van Gay.

Volley after volley went crashing up the cavern arch. The mountain people, however, were not to be longer held in obedience.

A wild prolonged howl came from them. Then they came surging down upon the three white men.

Nothing could stem that human tide. The mere weight of numbers would be overwhelming and Frank saw that the time had come to retreat.

So he cried:

"It is all up! We must get out of the way now! Fall back!"

At first they retreated slowly, firing as they went. But it soon became necessary to break into a mad run.

It taxed their best energies to keep ahead of the foe. But knowing that their lives depended on it they exerted every nerve.

It seemed an interminable distance to the mouth of the cavern. But presently it yawned before them.

Daylight and liberty was in sight. Death was behind them. On they ran.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TALE ENDS.

THE next moment they dashed out of the cavern and reached the sheltered ledge. They looked about for the air ship.

It was a little to the left of them. For some reason Pomp had been obliged to change its position.

The coon and the rescued aeronaut were at the rail shouting encouragement. Both had rifles.

"Quick!" cried Frank. "We must be lively!"

Straight for the air ship they ran. But close behind them out of the cavern came the barbarians.

Scarcely a dozen yards was between them.

"Hi-hi!" yelled Pomp. "Run, Marse Frank—run, all ob yo'l We gib it to dem!"

The two rifles on board the air ship spoke. Again and again they cracked as the repeaters worked.

One instant the barbarians wavered. But in that moment an incident occurred which encouraged them.

Javelins and slings were flying all about our adventurers as they stumbled on nigh exhausted. One of these struck Barney a glancing blow on the head.

The Celt went down momentarily stunned. A mighty yell went up from the pursuing mob.

On they rushed to finish their victim. In that one instant horror was supreme in Frank Reade, Jr.'s mind.

He and Van Gay might have kept on and reached the air ship in safety by leaving Barney to his fate.

But neither for an instant thought of such a cowardly thing as this. Frank stopped quick as a flash, as did Van Gay. They saw a shallow reef of ledge just to the right.

It hardly sheltered them, but Frank fired at the oncoming foe, and reaching down, grabbed Barney by the shoulder. How he accomplished the deed he never knew.

But he actually succeeded in drawing the stunned Celt back of the reef. He was struck twice by glancing stones, but was not seriously hurt.

Then he followed Van Gay's example and flung himself upon his face. The position was slightly elevated, and they could fire down upon the foe.

With four repeaters thus working the barbarians went down like grain before the sickle. They nearly reached the ledge.

Had they done so, Frank and his companions would probably have been slaughtered. But they did not succeed.

Barney had now recovered. He was a trifle dizzy, but well able to use his rifle, which he did. Reeling back, the mountain natives were repulsed.

They fled back into the cavern and did not reappear. It was a close shave for our adventurers.

"Be me sowl!" cried Barney, rubbing his head, "I've had me fill av all this! Shure the spalpeens nearly killed me!"

"I thought you were really done for, Barney," cried Van Gay; "it was a fortunate escape for us all."

"On the strength of which," said Frank, coolly, "let us go aboard and break a bottle of wine."

Barney turned a handspring to show that he was yet on earth and Pomp clapped his hands approvingly. The two cronies fairly embraced when Barney went over the rail.

"Golly fo' glory!" cried Pomp. "I done fought I had lost mah partner fo' a suttin fac! I'se glad enuff fo' to see yo', chile!"

"Bejabbers, I'm glad enuff fer to be wid yez meself," declared Barney, in his jolly way. "I'm afther thinkin' they ain't kilt us yet."

Frank and Van Gay had gripped hands with the rescued prisoner. If ever human being showed the effects of suffering and hard usage this man did.

"Gentlemen," he said in a choking voice, "I owe you more than I can ever pay. You have brought me back from the dead—back to a happiness and a possibility which I had never hoped to realize."

"Do not speak of it," said Frank, warmly. "We are very glad to have been able to do you the service. To help a fellow being in distress is always a great pleasure."

"Indeed it is," agreed Van Gay.

"You cannot possibly understand what it means to me," continued the aeronaut. "I have friends in America, a sweetheart, and a loving mother. I can now see my way clear to return to them. But my old friend, Professor Bent, being an old man without living relatives, was quite resigned to die."

"What?" exclaimed Frank and Van Gay in one breath. "You do not mean to say that your companion is dead?"

The aeronaut bowed in assent.

"That is true!" he declared.

"Then—it was your friend who was on the cliff that night and fell—"

"No, it was me."

Frank and Van Gay looked surprised.

"Then the professor—your companion was killed by the barbarians?"

Howard Stearns, for this was the young aeronaut's name, bowed.

"When I climbed back into the cavern that night," he said, "after seeing your air ship go crashing to the bottom of the gorge, I found that the fiends had entered our prison chamber and poor Bent lay dead on the stone floor with his head beaten to a jelly. None of the wretches were in the chamber when I entered, or I doubt not they would have served me the same."

"I feel quite sure now that they did not see me on the shelf of rock and fancied that I had got aboard your air ship. The door of the prison cell was open and no guard was there."

"Of course, I was awfully shocked to find Bent dead. But self-preservation is a strong instinct. Guessing the truth I slid out into the deserted passage, and ever since have been trying to find my way out of the awful den."

"And by a mishap I was seen by the barbarians and they gave chase. I ran until nearly dead from fatigue and then happened to see you. It seemed as if a new life was opening before me. You know the rest."

"We are glad that we were so fortunate as to be on hand at the right moment," said Frank, "but do you know the fate of your balloon?"

Stearns was astounded.

"Balloon?" he exclaimed; "how did you know that we came here in a balloon?"

"We came across it," replied Frank.

"Where?"

"Far up in Louisiana."

Stearns was almost speechless.

"Well," he finally exclaimed, "that is very strange. How did it come there?"

"I presume the air took it thither," replied Frank. "We found your log or journal in the car and came hither at once to try and give you aid."

Stearns sank into a chair and for a time was very thoughtful. Suddenly he lifted his head.

"But I have not explained to you how we came to lose the balloon," he said. "Shall I do so?"

"By all means."

"Of course you are familiar with everything up to the moment when we reached the Cloud City."

"Well, to Bent it was a most important discovery. He was determined to make friends with the mountain people, and in spite of my warnings anchored the balloon and went down to meet them."

"At first they seemed friendly enough and Bent urged me to come down also. It was a fatal move. While we were making apparently

friendly sign talk with them, several of the rascals had cut the anchor rope and were trying to pull the balloon down."

"Of course the Cruiser leaped miles into the air. Several of the natives hung to the rope and fell from a frightful height to an awful death. We were left in the power of a race of barbarians upon the highest peaks of the Andes, and from which the natives themselves could not descend."

"All might have been peaceful had it not been for the death of their confreres who had fallen from the clouds. This so angered the wretches that they were for killing us; but finally they decided to make slaves of us."

"And thus you can understand that we have been in torture most terrible for many months past. At times poor Bent meditated taking his life; but I have clung to hope through all, and at last my prayers have been answered."

"Yes," said Frank, with a hearty ring in his voice, "your troubles are over now, I believe. The balloon lies in the Louisiana swamp."

"Would that we had never seen it!" groaned the aeronaut.

"By the way," asked Van Gay, "can you tell me anything about the mineralogical features of this region? Are there any precious metals here?"

Howard Stearns' eyes flashed.

"There is enough gold under that Cloud City," he said, "to buy a dukedom. The cliff with all its passages is nothing but a mighty mine of the precious metals. It crops out in great seams and lumps. Do you wish to make a fortune?"

Van Gay looked at Frank.

"What do you say?" he asked; "shall we do a little prospecting about here?"

"How can we?" asked Frank. "We will run into the barbarians again!"

"We could drive them out all right."

Frank shook his head.

"It would be too much like downright slaughter," he said. "I don't care to lend myself to it."

So the matter dropped.

It would have been folly to have attempted the recovery of Bent's body. After some discussion a plan of action was agreed upon.

This was to sail away to the west and explore the upper end of the valley. Then a run down to the Pacific coast would be made.

After which the air ship would be turned homeward. The object of the trip had been accomplished, and all were satisfied.

"Home, sweet home!" sang Van Gay, "there is no place like home."

"That means more to me than to you!" declared Howard Stearns.

"When once I get back there I'll never leave it again."

Everybody laughed at this. Then Barney went to the keyboard and in a moment the air ship was aloft.

The trip up the Andean valley proved very interesting. But none of the mountain people were seen.

They had made themselves invisible from fear no doubt. But our voyagers cared little for this.

Finally, reaching the end of the valley, they descended from the high altitudes. Down the western slope they went to the sea.

Thence they coasted northward over the cities and towns, and the long stretches of wild coast until they reached Panama.

Not content, Frank kept on until they reached the Gulf of California. Then they sailed over to the wide plains and high ranges of Texas.

To describe all the incidents of the trip would require volumes. In due time they reached the banks of the Mississippi and headed northward for Chicago.

Here Stearns took leave of them to return to his home in Michigan. He was deeply affected in parting, and embraced his rescuers warmly.

"I shall never forget you, Mr. Reade," he declared. "I owe you my life."

"Well," said Van Gay, when the air ship was once more afloat, "I think our Andean trip has been a glorious success."

"Ay," agreed Frank, "it has. We have had some thrilling experiences, and it seems good to be at home once more."

"Indeed it does," agreed Van Gay. "What is the next trip, Frank?"

"I shall leave that to the future to decide," declared the young inventor; "but here we are at Readestown."

The air ship was soon safely in its store house. Legions of friends were on hand to welcome the voyagers home. And, having brought them safely to this happy point, let us leave them for the present.

[THE END.]

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